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# DEVELOPING THE SELF-GUIDING TRAIL IN THE NATIONAL FORESTS

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE · FOREST SERVICE  
Miscellaneous Publication 968







## PREFACE

The interpretive planner who develops an interpretive facility on a National Forest or National Grassland wants it to be successful. He wants people to use it, enjoy the interpretation, and receive something of value from it.

The inexperienced man especially, as he begins work, would like to be reasonably certain that the facility he is developing will be of a standard acceptable to both himself and the public. He can work with such assurance if, as outlined in the pages following, he will take the time and make the effort to think each interpretive job through, plan it in detail, and finally, work it out on the ground.

It is the purpose of this booklet to help him do so.

Although much of the following material applies to the development of any interpretive facility—auto tours, vista points, management demonstration areas—it is oriented to the development of the self-guiding trail, an excellent training ground for the beginner and always an interesting challenge for those more experienced.

This booklet is not a comprehensive textbook. It is instead a summing up of the basic considerations that must be taken into account and dealt with in great detail when planning, constructing, maintaining, or improving a self-guiding trail. It was produced by the Visitor Information Service of the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, to encourage constructive thinking and careful planning as well as creativity and imagination on the part of interpretive planners and all those people with various skills on whom the planner depends. Perhaps members of other organizations will also find it helpful.

The Forest Service will appreciate it if those who use this booklet will send at their convenience comments on its subject matter and recommendations as to additional material that should be included when it is revised. Comments should be addressed to the Chief, Forest Service, Washington, D.C., 20250.

*The  
self-guiding  
trail offers  
the visitor an  
opportunity  
to experience  
and learn,  
by himself  
and at his  
leisure,  
something of  
his environment.*

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## THE SELF-GUIDING TRAIL



trail cannot do every interpretive job, but it does have certain advantages over other facilities.

### ADVANTAGES

Its outstanding advantage is that it allows visitors to see features in their natural setting, and provides an experience more realistic and often more memorable than interpretation by indoor facilities.

A trail is relatively economical to construct, and can be developed fairly rapidly. Improvements can be made easily, and mistakes in planning or development can be corrected quickly and at less cost than would be involved with most other facilities.

If a trail is self-guiding, it has additional advantages. It can serve a large number of people, yet does not require the presence and expense of an interpreter. Visitors may walk the trail when they wish and at their own pace, and may receive as much or as little of the interpretation as they want. For these reasons, it is favored by those who prefer individual activities to organized group participation.

The self-guiding trail is especially enjoyable for parents and children. It helps parents explain its features, and allows children the freedom to look and to question at leisure.

Self-guiding trails fall into three categories:

### *1. The Story or Theme Trail*

This trail tells a story or develops a theme. A definite story or theme gives a trail unity and coherence, and gives the visitor a point of reference to retain along the entire route. This is the most effective type of self-guiding trail; unity, coherence, and a story theme increase the visitor's understanding and help him remember more of the interpretation.

### *2. The Miscellaneous Trail*

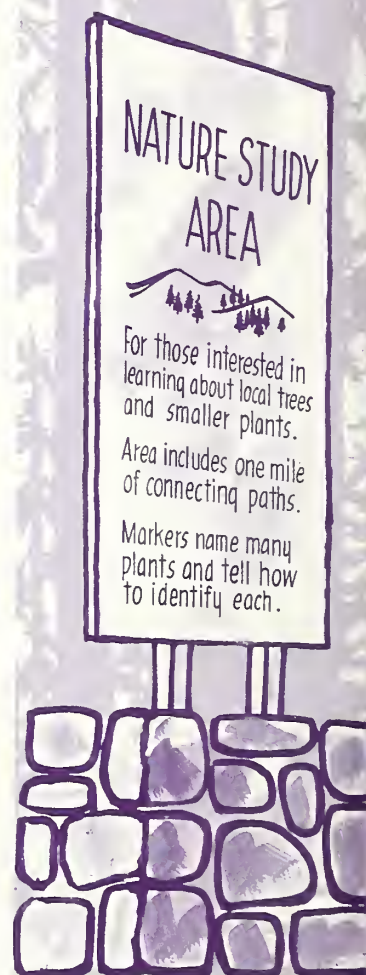
This trail interprets a variety of features, but does not attempt to show any relationship between them. It is the most commonly developed, perhaps because it is easier to plan than the story or theme trail. Although there are some places where it is justified, the miscellaneous trail should not be planned until careful study proves that no better interpretive opportunity exists in the area. Because the miscellaneous trail tends to interpret the obvious, it often features general information about subjects common to many places. The danger here is that the resulting trail may disappoint the visitor; previously he may have walked a similar trail in another National Forest.

### *3. The Nature Trail*

This trail is concerned only with identification, not interpretation. To put a story or miscellaneous trail in this category simply by incorporating the word "nature" into a trail's name is not correct, though it has often been done. The true nature trail is one along which plants and other natural features are labeled with their common and scientific names and distinguishing characteristics. Such a trail serves the specific purpose of providing an opportunity for study by professional and amateur naturalists.

Some deviation from the approach usually taken in developing trails of other types might greatly increase the true nature trail's usefulness as a study facility.

Why, for example, limit the number of labels as is recommended for other trails? Every plant and other natural feature in an area may be of interest to someone. Let the trail wander wherever it needs to go to reach as many of an area's features as possible and, if necessary, allow side trails or spurs. Perhaps a good approach in appropriate locations would be to develop this kind of facility as a Nature Study Area rather than the more common Nature Trail.







## BASES FOR DECISIONS

### THE INTERPRETER'S TASK

Basic to all interpretive problems are three factors: Subject matter, information about it, and potential audience. The interpreter's task is to bring subject matter and audience together and to communicate information and understanding that will contribute to the visitor's enjoyment and appreciation.

### PROVING AN INTERPRETIVE OPPORTUNITY

For any specific project, the planner's first step is to determine the answers to five questions:

1. Is the subject matter of interest to the visitor?
2. Is the area accessible or can it be made accessible to an audience?
3. Is there a potential audience?
4. Can the potential audience be attracted to the facility as a using or participating audience?
5. Is the subject matter appropriate for interpretation by the Forest Service?

If, in the planner's judgment, the answer to all these questions is affirmative, an interpretive opportunity exists.





### OPPORTUNITY IN THREE SITUATIONS

With the existence of an opportunity proved, the interpreter may make a tentative decision to develop a self-guiding trail in one of the three following situations:

#### *1. The Existing Story Opportunity*

He may decide that an area's story can be told effectively by a self-guiding trail, or there may be a single outstanding feature around which a story can be developed. He would then plan and construct a trail to fit the story.

Such a trail was built on the George Washington National Forest to tell the story of an old iron furnace. Along the trail the history of the area unfolds: the operation of the furnace, cutting the rich forest to make charcoal to run the furnace, the effect of the iron industry on the economy of the region, the ultimate destruction of the forest, its purchase by the Government, and the regeneration of the forest under good management practices.

#### *2. The Existing Trail and Audience Opportunity*

The interpreter may decide to convert an existing heavily used trail into a self-guiding trail in order to take advantage of a readymade audience. Before doing so, he should first make certain that the trail would lend itself to purposeful interpretation of interest to visitors.

### 3. *The Existing Audience Opportunity*

The interpreter may decide that a self-guiding trail is needed at a heavily visited area where there is no dominant story, outstanding feature, or existing trail suitable for conversion. In this situation, his problem is to find a site where a trail could be located and also where a worthwhile story could be told. If several sites meeting these criteria were discovered, he would choose the one that offered visitors the best combination of trail location and story. In time, some of the other sites could be used to present other themes.

#### **EVALUATE LOCATION**

In planning to develop a new trail, the planner should study the topography of an area and the location of its features to make sure that a trail could be laid out easily, that it would be accessible to enough people to justify its construction, and that adequate parking space could be provided.

#### **DETERMINE WHAT AND HOW TO INTERPRET**

Before making the final decision to develop a trail, the interpreter must become thoroughly familiar with the area. Researching an area's management, history, and natural history helps determine what story, features, or combination of both should be interpreted, and whether a self-guiding trail would be a good means of interpretation.

#### **AVOID DUPLICATION**

Finally, a self-guiding trail should not compete with or duplicate other interpretation. A trail, or auto tour as in the illustration below, should supplement and strengthen the rest of a program, just as interpretation by other facilities in an area should strengthen that of a trail.

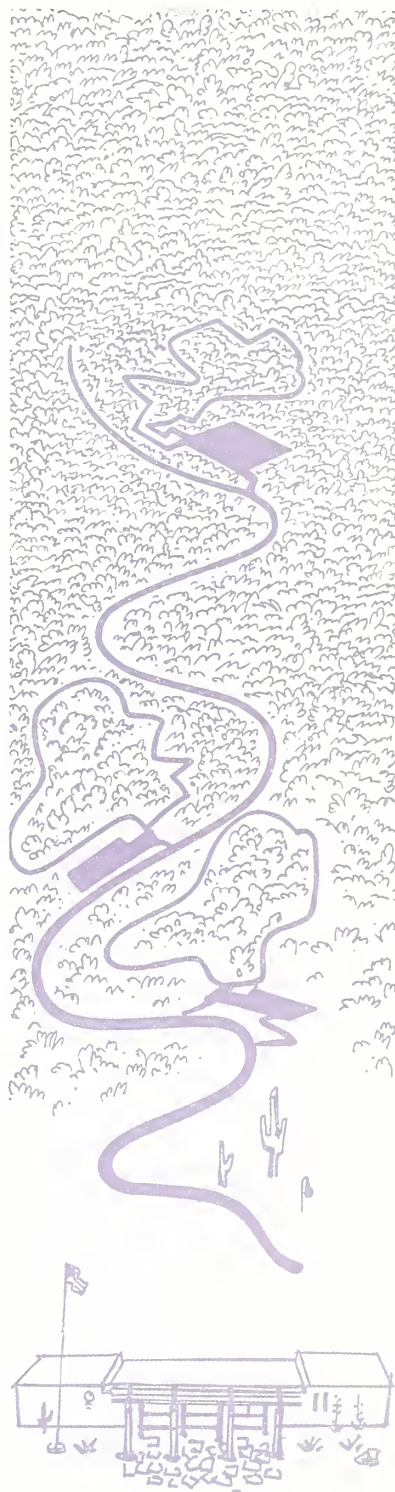
For example, part of the interpretive program on the Coronado National Forest concerns the vegetation types of Mount Lemmon. A Visitor Center at the mouth of Sabino Canyon contains exhibits that introduce the visitor to different vegetation types, making him aware of their existence and arousing his interest in learning more. The visitor is then invited to take the self-guiding auto tour up Mount Lemmon and to stop at designated places where he can see different vegetation types and learn their story from interpretive signs.

The Visitor Center exhibits do not present detailed information on many individual plants, while the trail signs primarily concern the plants and other features in their immediate area. The exhibits present the broad, general story; the signs the specific, detailed story.

### **SELECTING FEATURES FOR INTERPRETATION**

#### **COVER THE THEME**

When selecting features to be interpreted along a self-guiding trail, the interpreter must include enough to cover a theme adequately, yet not so many that visitors might lose interest.





## HOW MANY FEATURES?

Although each situation varies, 15 to 18 features are about the right number for a half-mile trail. In most areas, the problem is not in finding enough features to develop a theme, but in selecting the more important features and avoiding those of less interest.

## FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING FEATURES

The amount of time a visitor has available to spend on a trail is a factor in determining the proper number of features. A trail used mainly by campers can have more features interpreted than one used primarily by motorists passing through a forest.

Usually there can be more features interpreted along the first half of a trail than the last half. People are eager and ready for interpretation at the start, but their interest tends to decrease as they tire.

Age groups within an expected audience also should be considered when selecting features. Most trails are used by family groups, and should include items of interest to both children and adults. Sometimes it is practical to separate adults' and children's interpretation, as is done on the Blue Ridge Parkway of the National Park System where two interpretive leaflets are used for the same trail.

A trail exclusively for children can be developed at some locations, such as near a youth camp. Freeman Tilden's book, "Interpreting Our Heritage" (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill), contains a helpful chapter on interpretation for children. In general, keep interpretation simple, but don't talk down to children. They particularly like signs and devices that allow participation.

Distance sometimes determines which of several similar features should be selected. Having features too closely grouped is as undesirable as having them widely separated. However, features important to the interpretation must not be left out merely because they are close together.

## TEMPORARY FEATURES

Do not overlook features that visitors are naturally curious about, although they may not be essential to a story or theme. Information such as how high the waterfall is, how far away the mountain peak is, or what has killed all the trees, answers the obvious questions and adds interest to the trail.

Features of a temporary or seasonal nature are often worth interpreting and can be easily included. Even on a trail normally interpreted by a leaflet keyed to permanent markers (see item 2, page 9), such features can be interpreted by using signs which can be removed when the features have disappeared.

## RARE OR UNIQUE FEATURES

Rare or unique features greatly enrich interpretation, but there is always a risk that they will be damaged or destroyed if special atten-





tion is called to them. Interpretation that mentions taste, smell, or the feel of foliage is an invitation to break twigs and pick leaves.

The decision whether to include such features depends on the interpreter's judgment of a local situation, but in general, interpretation should be avoided unless a practical method of protection can be worked out. For example: A trail featuring the record MacArthur white pine could be developed on the Nicolet National Forest, but a large number of visitors could destroy the tree by compressing the soil above its root system. A small barrier around the tree could keep visitors at a distance and make it feasible to include the tree in the interpretive program.

### FEATURES WITH HIDDEN SIGNIFICANCE

Another kind of feature that enriches interpretation is often overlooked, particularly by the beginning interpreter. This is the feature that has little or no meaning for visitors until its significance is pointed out by an interpretive message.

There is a place in Colorado where a trail crosses a sandy area. Visitors on the trail pass the spot without noticing a slight discoloration in the sand. But if an interpretive message explained that the discoloration was caused by lightning fusing the sand into a glasslike substance, forming a fulgurite, then the discoloration would be of significance and interest to the visitor.

### MANMADE FEATURES

Along some trails it may be desirable to add interest and variety to the interpretation through the installation of a manmade feature—an interpretive device or exhibit that is not a part of the natural scene.

Such devices might include:

1. A Tree Finder.—By using a chart and sighting through a simple finder, the visitor can find and examine trees of special interest.
2. A Sniff Box.—Fill with aromatic leaves, or perhaps sassafras roots, and let the visitor sniff.
3. Hypsometer.—Let the visitor guess the height of a tree and then prove himself right or wrong.

Devices like these have a great appeal because they allow the visitor to do something, to participate in the interpretation.

Manmade exhibits can be effective, even though installed in a natural scene, if their presence and purpose directly contribute to the interpretation.

A cord of wood, or a length of lumber measuring 1 board foot, for example, would be appropriate along a forest trail interpreting management, logging, or other aspects of forestry. Similarly effective would be a display of wood products such as a group of wooden handles for axes and other implements.



## RESEARCHING SUBJECT MATTER

The importance of thorough research cannot be overemphasized. The effectiveness and the quality of interpretation depend to the greatest degree on the amount of research done.

Local libraries and local residents serve as good starting points. Helpful information can be obtained also from professors of local universities, Federal and State agencies, and local and State historical societies.

### SUBJECT MATTER CATEGORIES

The subject matter to be interpreted will generally concern land management, natural history, or history. Following are examples of reference material for each category.

#### A. Land Management

THE LIVING FOREST. Jack McCormick, Harper & Brothers, New York.

#### B. Natural History

##### 1. Identification

a. Peterson Field Guide Series. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.

##### 2. Detail

a. A NATURAL HISTORY OF TREES OF EASTERN AND CENTRAL NORTH AMERICA, Donald Culross Peattie, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.

b. A NATURAL HISTORY OF WESTERN TREES, Donald Culross Peattie, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.

##### 3. General

a. THE FOREST. Peter Farb, Time Inc., Time & Life Bldg., New York, N.Y., 10020.

b. LIVING EARTH. Peter Farb, Harper & Brothers, New York, N.Y.

c. THE WEB OF LIFE. John H. Storer, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 501 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y., 10022.

#### C. History

CALIFORNIA PLACE NAMES. Erwin G. Gudde, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.





## METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

There are three ways a self-guiding trail can be interpreted. The interpreter must judge which method would be most effective and practical in a particular situation.

### *1. Trailside Signs*

A self-guiding trail can be interpreted entirely through texts on signs placed at each chosen feature. This method is practical because it is fairly inexpensive and the rest of the interpretation is not disrupted when changing signs, adding new ones, or removing out-of-date signs. This flexibility is especially valuable when a trail is first being developed.

### *2. Leaflet Keyed to Trailside Markers*

Interpretive texts may be printed in a leaflet that is dispensed from a box at the beginning of a trail. Each text is numbered to correspond with numbered markers along the trail.

Leaflets are generally more effective than signs; interpretation can be more detailed and the visitor can take a leaflet home to refresh his memory. A leaflet also lets the visitor read while walking or while standing at a distance from a feature. This is especially helpful on a crowded trail.

Leaflets cost more than signs over a period of time where a trail is heavily used. Visitors, even when members of a group, often want a copy for each person. Maintenance costs are increased because some leaflets end up littering the trail, and an employee must regularly refill the dispensing box.

### *3. General Appreciation*

There are some trails, such as those through memorial forests or near-natural areas, where trailside signs or markers would detract from the esthetic values that are of prime importance. For these trails, the best interpretation might be a leaflet or nearby sign telling the general story of the entire area.



# WRITING INTERPRETIVE TEXTS

## EFFECTIVE WRITING

Effective interpretive texts and imaginative titles are essential to the success of a self-guiding trail. To be effective, they must be interesting enough to be read, clear enough to be completely understood, and must communicate information worth knowing.

Writing the texts demands a thorough understanding of the subject to be interpreted, and the ability to communicate understanding to the visitor. Such composition requires much thought and a precise use of language.

## WRITE FOR COMPLETENESS, CLARITY, AND ACCURACY

Texts interpreting a trail, whether for use on signs or in a leaflet, must be written so that each is complete in itself. As a rule, each should cover only one subject and should be limited to one or two of the most important ideas or facts concerning it. At the same time, texts taken together must present a well-balanced interpretation of a trail without noticeable duplication of information.

Trailside texts should be short, seldom more than 50 words. Even though visitors usually do not want to read anything much longer, clarity should never be sacrificed for brevity. A longer, well-written text will be read through more often than one that is shorter but poorly written.

An interpretive text may contain information for the professional scientist, but its first obligation is to the general public. Technical or unfamiliar words, and complex concepts, should be avoided unless they can be explained and their presence adds something to the text.

In keeping texts brief, guard against oversimplification that may not teach a visitor anything new, and thus bore him. A statement is not oversimplified if it contains enough information to give the visitor a clear understanding of the subject, if it does not mislead him to a false conclusion or imply one, and if it adds to his knowledge.

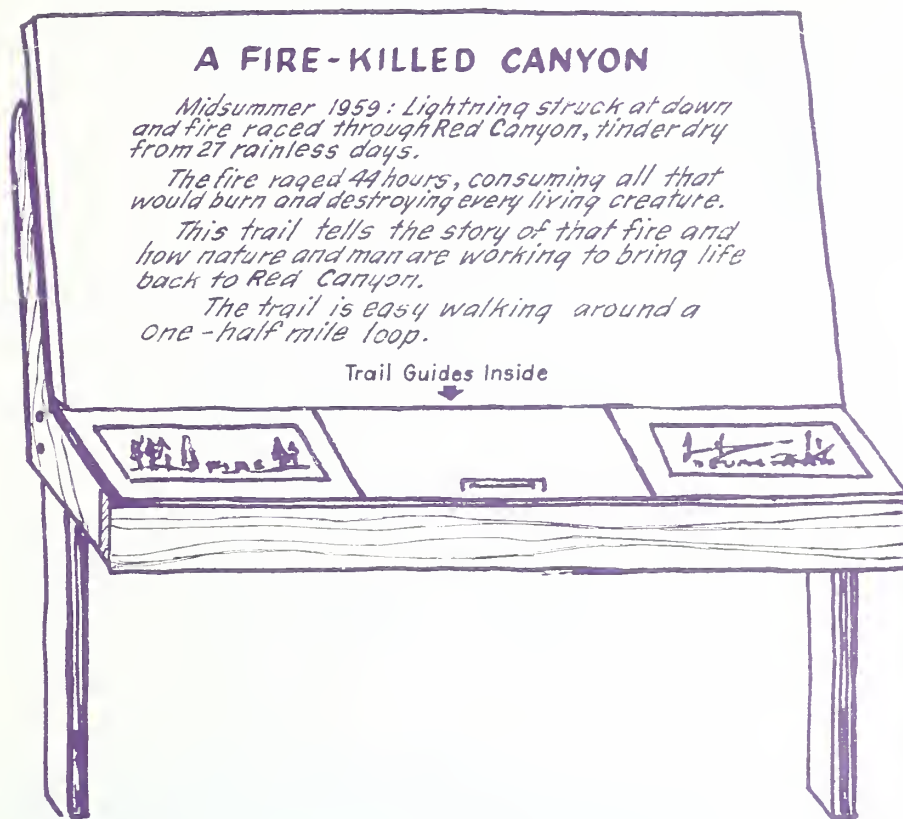
Accuracy is all-important. Facts, spelling, punctuation—even the exact meaning of words—must be carefully checked several times. Errors can occur in any step of sign construction or leaflet preparation.

## AN ENTRANCE SIGN MUST MOTIVATE

The text for an entrance sign, including a provocative name for the trail, is often the most difficult of all to write because it must get the visitor's attention and, almost at a glance, communicate so much information. Typical of too many trails are easy-to-write names like HICKORY RIDGE NATURE TRAIL that do not incite the visitor's interest. More imaginative titles such as A FIRE-KILLED CANYON, and MOUNTAIN MEDICINE, are interesting because they are indicative of the interpretation awaiting the visitor.







In addition to an arresting title, the entrance sign should preview the trail's attractions, telling the visitor something of what he could see or why he would enjoy the trail. It should also tell him the length or walking time, the trail's condition, and where it ends. All of the text, and the trail's name, should accomplish the important purpose of making the visitor want to take the trail.

#### **CHOOSE TEXT FORMS WITH CARE**

The final composition of an interpretive text may take many forms. It may be descriptive, story-telling, specific, provocative, familiar, humorous, or a combination of two or more. But unless the writer is skilled, he should depend primarily on the descriptive, story-telling, or specific text forms. The familiar and humorous forms are difficult, and if not skillfully written are often ineffective or even offensive to the visitor.

Following are sample interpretive texts.

## DESCRIPTIVE

### *BUTTE*

The “greatest mining camp on earth” built on the “richest hill in the world.” That hill, which has produced over \$2 billion worth of gold, silver, copper, and zinc, is literally honeycombed with shafts, tunnels, and excavations that extend beneath the city. There are over 3,000 miles of workings, and shafts reach a depth of 4,000 feet.—Adapted From Montana State Highway Historical Sign.

## STORY-TELLING

### *EMIGRANT GULCH*

A party of emigrants who had traveled with a wagon train across the plains via the Bozeman or Bonanza Trail arrived in this gulch August 28, 1864. Two days later three of these men explored the upper and more inaccessible portion of the gulch and struck good pay. A mining boom followed.—From Montana State Highway Historical Sign.

## SPECIFIC (DETAILS ABOUT ONE SUBJECT)

Flat top, short needles, and generally poor appearance indicate that growth in this tree has nearly stopped. The forester marks this type of tree for early harvest cutting.—From the Black Hills National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.

## LIFE-GIVING SUN

These young Douglas-firs owe their lives to this opening in the forest, for it allows them the full sunlight they must have to survive.



The opening was made when mature Douglas-firs were harvested from this 40-acre cutting unit. The soil, cleared of all trees and left open to the sun, was then ready to grow another timber crop.

# **SIGNS AND LEAFLETS NEED GOOD DESIGN**

## **THE PURPOSE OF GOOD DESIGN**

All basic design elements, as well as the setting and theme of a trail, must be considered when designing an interpretive sign or leaflet. Good design attracts attention, and gives trail signs and leaflets a quality which means to the visitor that here is something that has been carefully prepared, probably by a professional man, and therefore is authentic and worth reading and knowing.

The design of leaflets should not be a problem to the Forest Service interpretive planner, for expert help is readily available to him. He should, however, be aware that an important consideration particular to the self-guiding trail leaflet is that it be easy for visitors to hold and to read while walking or looking at features. A leaflet opening from the side is usually easier to handle than one opening from the bottom. If it is small enough to go into a pocket without too much folding, visitors are more apt to take it home for further reading than to discard it, possibly on the ground. Very small or "fancy" printing type should be avoided. For leaflets used outdoors, a tinted paper stock is recommended as being easier on the eyes than white stocks.

Since the designing of interpretive signs is relatively new in the Forest Service, the interpretive planner should keep the following in mind when working with those responsible for designing and producing signs.

## **BASIC DESIGN ELEMENTS**

An interpretive sign should harmonize with its forest environment and should never be obtrusive, particularly because of size. Its size should be determined by its location and by the distances from which it will normally be read. A small sign, if properly placed, can be as effective as a large one.

The shape of a sign should serve as a visible but unobtrusive frame for its subject matter. It is wise to avoid novel forms. They soon become dated.

Textural interest can help a design if the material chosen is appropriate to subject and surroundings. Again, avoid novelty, because it draws attention to the sign itself—the means—and reduces attention to the idea or message you want to convey—the objective.

Color and illustrations are excellent aids in achieving the brevity, clarity, and visual appeal required for trail signs. Illustrations help attract visitors to one sign after another. Just text matter, good though it may be, looks dull at a glance. Colors can be vivid in small amounts, but backgrounds and large areas should appear in neutral colors appropriate to a forest setting. Illustrations can be accom-

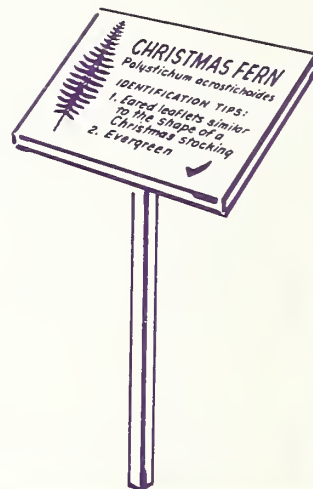
plished by simple outline routing, more elaborate painting, photographs, or weatherproof cutouts.

### MAKE SIGNS EASY TO READ

The ease with which a sign can be read depends greatly on color contrasts, on the size and style of letters, and on spacing around letters and between words, sentences, and lines. Letter size should be in proportion to the distances from which the sign will normally be read. The style used should be appropriate to the subject and easy to read. Novel lettering should be used with care, and then only rarely.

Spacing should be adequate for ease in reading. Never run sentences together like this. Never let spacing be so irregular as to make words in a sentence seem disconnected.

DO NOT CAPITALIZE AN ENTIRE TEXT, DO NOT CROWD IT WITH INADEQUATE MARGINS, AND DO NOT USE THE SOLID BLOCK FORM. SUCH SIGNS ARE VISUALLY UNINTERESTING AND THEIR TEXTS ARE HARD TO READ. UPPER AND LOWER CASE LETTERS MAKE SENTENCES AS WELL AS PROPER AND PLACE NAMES MORE DISTINCT. PARAGRAPHS, INDENTED OR NOT BUT WITH EXTRA SPACE BETWEEN THEM, MAKE A LONG TEXT EASY TO READ, MORE PLEASING TO LOOK AT.



## MOUNTAIN MEDICINE



"Grandma" Ellie Pratt  
harvesting "yarbs" - 1931

*A generation ago the isolated and independent people hereabouts used home remedies when sickness struck.*

*Some of the plants they used for remedies are featured along this half-mile loop trail.*

OZARK NATIONAL FOREST  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE · FOREST SERVICE



## PROCEED WITH CAUTION

One of the most important phases of design is the layout; that is, the placement of text and art in relation to each other and to the background provided by a sign or a leaflet. If the design is good, then all elements will be combined in a unified arrangement that is both pleasing and effective. Whether this final arrangement is symmetrical or asymmetrical, it must give proper emphasis to each element.

At this point, proceed with caution. With the layout on the drawing board, study the design and each of its elements both separately and as a unified whole. If changes or improvements are indicated, make them now. The investment in a drawing board layout is small compared to that of a completed sign.

## ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

When writing and designing a complete set of interpretive and informational signs for a self-guiding trail, plan the placement and frequency of organizational identification so as not to interfere with the primary purposes of the trail and its signs.

If a trail begins at a campground, overlook, or other location where the organization is clearly identified, identification normally should not be repeated at the trail entrance. Otherwise, the organization should be identified either on the entrance sign or on a separate sign nearby. In either case, identification should not detract from the entrance sign or its text. As in the example below, it is always appropriate to identify the organization modestly at the end of a trail with a separate sign which may express the hope that the visitor enjoyed the trail, or may direct him to other trails or facilities.

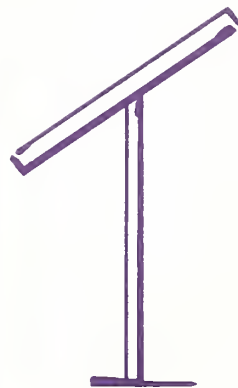
Trailside signs generally should carry only the interpretive text. Organizational identification on each sign would compete with the interpretation and would become monotonous, probably with adverse effect on the visitor. An exception might be made on a longer trail, with the organization identified about midpoint on a directional or informational sign.

### TRAIL'S END

We hope that this walk through forest and field  
has added to your appreciation of the world  
around you.

Nature is a never-ending source of enjoyment.  
Please return often.

WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE • FOREST SERVICE



## **TRAIL DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION**

### **BUILD TO ACCEPTABLE STANDARDS**

The job of laying out a self-guiding trail and building it to acceptable standards is as important to the success of a trail as planning its interpretation.

A trail must be wide enough to accommodate the expected visitor load, and hazardous or unduly difficult sections must be avoided where possible. Otherwise, safety devices such as guardrails or handrails must be installed. Insofar as possible, the esthetic qualities of the area should not be lessened by the construction of a trail.

When considering the conversion of an existing trail to a self-guiding trail, don't chance wasting time in developing interpretation that may not be used. Study the route first and make certain that necessary improvements can be effected.

### **KEEP TRAILS SHORT**

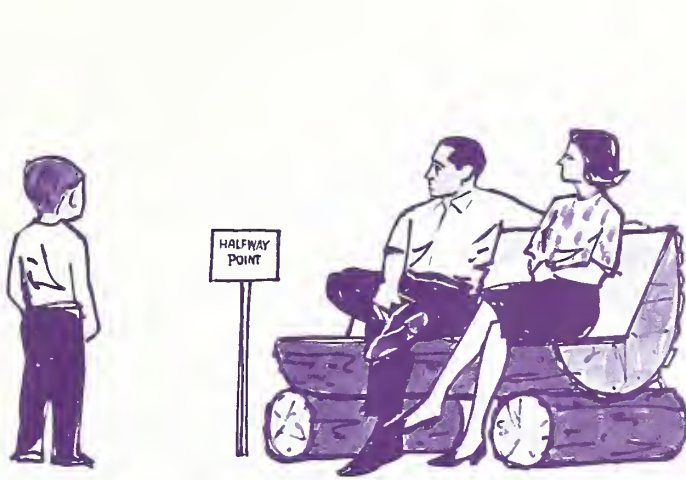
The length of a self-guiding trail will vary with the location, but where possible it should be short—about one-half mile. At some locations, such as a rest area along a highway, even a quarter-mile self-guiding trail can be successful.

In many instances the length of a trail will be dictated by topography. One of the best opportunities for interpretation on the George Washington National Forest is at Sherando Lake. There the topography is such that the only practical location for a trail is a route around the lake, a distance of about 1 mile.

#### *Visitors Like Loop Trails . . .*

Wherever possible a self-guiding trail should be in the form of a loop, ending in approximately the same place it began. Most people do not like to retrace their steps.

The simplest and probably commonest arrangement is the single loop; however, the double loop or figure eight has a distinct advantage. Those visitors who have limited time or interest, or who are not able to walk far, can take the first loop only. These who have more time and want to see more can take both.



#### *. . . A Bench for Relaxing . . .*

The visitor can learn much about nature by just sitting and observing. Even on short trails a rustic bench is appropriate. There the visitor can sit and relax and discover the forest environment partly on his own.

#### *. . . And a View*

Selective cutting may open beautiful vistas along a self-guiding trail to add variety and enrich the trail.

#### **PLACE SIGNS PROPERLY**

Signs or markers along the trail should be placed in such a way that there is no question as to the identity of the feature being interpreted. At the same time, they should not be unnecessarily intrusive and should be placed as esthetically as possible. They should never be attached to a tree or other feature, but should be located so that they can be read with ease, and the height of the sign should not require visitors to stoop, stretch, or otherwise exert themselves.

The entrance sign should be in an attractive setting where it will be readily seen, and should be placed so that visitors who wish to photograph it can do so easily.

#### **ORIENTATION IS ALWAYS HELPFUL**

In addition to interpretive signs or markers, information or orientation signs are appropriate along self-guiding trails. Small markers to indicate the one-quarter, one-half, and three-quarter points of longer trails, and directional signs at the intersection of a double loop trail are always helpful to visitors.



## **EVALUATING THE TRAIL**

### **CHECK FOR EFFECTIVENESS**

A self-guiding trail, no matter how carefully planned and constructed, can never be considered finished. Its effectiveness with the public must be continually checked.

### **EVALUATION FORMS PROHIBITED**

The use of any written evaluation form, and formal oral questioning by Federal agencies is prohibited without specific approval of the Bureau of the Budget (Forest Service Manual 1374.2). However, by talking informally with visitors using a trail, the interpreter can determine such things as whether the visitor understands the interpretation and finds it interesting and enjoyable, and whether a trail is too long or includes too much interpretation. Such observations are valuable in determining where improvement is needed.

## **MAINTAINING THE TRAIL**

### **BEGIN MAINTENANCE IMMEDIATELY**

An adequate maintenance program contributes to the continuing effectiveness of a self-guiding trail, and should be started as soon as a trail is constructed.

The trail and markers should be kept clear of trash and undesirable plants. Poisonous plants especially should be cleared from the trail although some, if out of reach, could be retained and labeled so that visitors could learn to recognize them.

### **KEEP DUPLICATES ON HAND**

Trail signs or markers that have been damaged should be replaced without delay. It is a good idea and usually economical to keep duplicate markers or signs on hand.

Fallen logs, wet spots, and other conditions which inconvenience the trail user should be corrected promptly. Good trail maintenance will spot potential hazards that can be eliminated before they become troublesome.

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*"...recreation is a major value of the forests ...  
the woods and mountains should be  
enjoyed by their owners,  
the citizens of the United States ..."*

—JOHN SIEKER

*in Trees, Yearbook of Agriculture 1949*





The Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, is dedicated to the principle of multiple use management of the Nation's forest resources for sustained yields of wood, water, forage, wildlife, and recreation. Through forestry research, cooperation with the States and private forest owners, and management of the National Forests and National Grasslands, it strives—as directed by Congress—to provide increasingly greater service to a growing Nation.